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Vice presidential debate and Catholicism

Pat Perriello | Oct. 16, 2012 NCR Today

In the recent debate, two Catholic candidates for the vice presidency of the United States were asked [1] about their position on abortion as it relates to their Catholic faith.

Certainly, all of us must feel a degree of pride at how far Catholics have come in our country's history. We have come from being marginalized to being an integral part of the life of our country, including placing six justices on our Supreme Court. The change came because we believed in the promise of the United States, and we adopted its philosophy and ideals as our own. I believe these two candidates can serve to remind us about what it means to be part of a multicultural nation that respects and values all people and is dedicated to protecting the rights of all its citizens.

Paul Ryan is clearly committed to an active role on the abortion issue. He is seeking legislation and restrictions to outlaw and limit abortion in any way he can. There are many Catholics who support that position.

Joe Biden clearly states that he accepts the teaching of his church on the issue of abortion. I'm pretty sure he has never been an integral part of any abortion that might have occurred among family or friends. On the other hand, he does not believe in imposing his and his church's position on those who hold a different view. I believe there are also many Catholics who adhere to this particular view as well.

The problem is that certain bishops are not satisfied with this position. Not only do they expect adherence to church teaching, they want to expand their reach to insist that all Catholics be activists like Paul Ryan. They want to not only tell us what to believe, but what we are required to do about that belief. They want to demand a certain political stance on this issue that goes beyond the role of the magisterium.

Dissent in the church is often only an issue because Rome and some bishops want to make every issue an issue of dissent. This obsession with control and absolute authority is stiffing the Catholic church. The history of the church contains more than enough heresy trials. Are we now going to conduct trials on whether one supported a particular piece of legislation? Maybe we also need to determine whether one's support was vigorous enough.

Many bishops know better, but they remain silent. We tend to hear only from the bishops who are determined to exercise absolute control. Perhaps this is why the famous theologian Hans Kung has called on priests and laity alike to challenge the bishops whenever they propose an unreasonable agenda.

I believe both Biden and Ryan represent authentic ways of being Catholic. Everyone cannot stand on picket lines. If everyone was militantly pro-life, who would advocate for the poor, for civil rights, for the oppressed? St. Paul tells us that we each have our own charism and thus contribute to the body of Christ in different ways.

The real danger as we approach the November election is that we become more and more a single-issue voting bloc. As important an issue as abortion is, what is its role in the presidential election? To vote only on abortion and discount Syria, employment, poverty and other critical issues seems to actually minimize the church's role in the world. Bishops who encourage Catholics to vote based only on the abortion issue seem to have a limited

understanding of the breadth of the church's teaching and influence in the world over the centuries.

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[1] http://www.religionnews.com/politics/election/how-the-vice-presidential-debate-emphasized-single-issue-catholicism